

# State unit investigates cold criminal cases

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Comments (1)

When 8-year-old Valerie Peterson and her bike were launched into the air nearly four decades ago in a lethal hit-and-run accident, police immediately suspected one man.

Her family hoped Valerie's killer would soon be brought to justice. But after decades of stalled leads and even destroyed evidence, the Petersons say they doubt the person will ever face charges.

The Iowa Cold Case Unit began last year to re-examine unsolved cases like Valerie's with modern crime-fighting tools, with a hope of bringing justice to victims' families.

"Much of the time, even thinking about what happened to my sister still feels like someone hit me and my family with a 100-pound pole," Eileen Peterson said.

Since its formation, the cold-case unit, which has federal funding through 2011, has not cracked any of Iowa's approximately 150 cold cases.

But the unit has scraped together enough DNA from crime-scene evidence, such as old clothes and body hair, to check the results against a nationwide database of felons.

They are currently awaiting results.

"Obviously, we didn't know what to expect with stuff from the '60s and '70s, but we're getting excited about possibly getting results on those old cases," said Michael Motsinger, an Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation special agent who leads the three-person team.

Authorities said they fear they will never gather enough evidence to prosecute the person who swerved into Valerie Peterson on an early May afternoon in 1971.

The girl was riding her bike in front of a Lutheran church in Manson, a small town about 20 miles west of Fort Dodge. Valerie was catapulted into the air, landed on the blue-green pickup truck and tumbled to the ground. She died instantly.

Calhoun County Sheriff Bill Davis was the same age as Valerie when she died. He said he remembers hearing his parents talk about the crime.

When Davis became sheriff in 1989, he revisited the case at the Peterson family's urging. He said the evidence all seemed to point to one man who had been living in the same community as the victim's family since the accident.

When Davis tried to track the physical evidence, which included Valerie's bicycle, he made a discovery that shocked the Petersons. The evidence had been thrown out years ago, he said, because the statute of limitations for a hit-and-run crime had run out. "I really, really feel for the family, because I have a daughter, too," he said. "I know I would want to know, even after all these years."

In the years since, he has handed the Peterson files to a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent, and even explored asking the suspect to take a polygraph test. But state investigators said they would not administer one unless Davis planned to file criminal charges.

Meanwhile, Valerie's family continues its pursuit of justice. Eileen Peterson, 50, said the experience probably helped propel her into a career as an international human rights lawyer.

Peterson has spent much of her career investigating human rights violations in Bosnia and Nepal. She said a common thread runs through the families of crime victims worldwide.

"I think the thing that almost hurts the most for victims and in cold cases is the silence, along with a feeling of powerlessness," she said.